RELIGION LANGUAGE
AND
PHILOSOPHY

BY

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of a contemporary approach to these important subjects. The Institute is grateful to Dr Palmer for permission to publish these lectures in our Golden Jubilee Series.

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A RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE FOR EMPIRICISTS

Empiricists regard ordinary everyday experience as the only safe source of human knowledge, and are naturally dubious of any information received through a sixth, religious, sense or by means of some indescribable mystical experience. This doubt they commonly extend to what are called 'religious experiences', since each of these seems private to the person having it, and unrepeatable; although these features are both shared by sunsets, symphony concerts, and sonnets (as suddenly understood). Finally, the major religious concepts themselves are attacked as unknowable and therefore meaningless: God, Heaven, Salvation are things 'the eye hath not seen', so the mind cannot grasp them either. They are all absurd. Beauty, Number, Truth and Harmony, though equally invisible, are not regarded as absurd, at least by the more humane empiricists.

For all its crude extravagance, this thorough-going rejection of religion and of religious language has a certain dogged consistency, *if* religious statements are taken as literal descriptions of another, spiritual world. It was of course common to grant that some such statements may be pictorial; usually on the supposition that these could be translated, when required, into the other, literal terms. Recently, however, the idea has been mooted that religious language is entirely non-literal,

non-descriptive, even non-cognitive in its functioning.
If that were so, empiricists might return to the religious
fold with a good conscience. That it *is* so, is the view
put forward by R. B. Braithwaite, Cambridge empiricist
and philosopher of science.[1]

II

A society of empiricists, who reject religion and the
supernatural, may still need some common code of morals
by which to order and control their mutual dealings in
that society. And if they are rational beings, their moral
rules will soon be organised as consequences of a much
smaller set of moral *principles*. The question then arises,
how such moral principles can be commended, if not
proved or justified.

For some centuries, metaphysicians constructed
systematic stories of what the world ultimately is, from
which stories they hoped to derive the duties of its
inhabitants. In the present century these construc-
tions have been largely abandoned; because the con-
struction itself was seen to be pure speculation, i.e., mere
guess work; and because of a new speculative dogma
which forbade the derivation of moral principles from
any non-moral statements, such as those in a system of
metaphysics.

From the theory of the Autonomy of Morals it seems
to follow that if Smith wants some moral principles he
will just have to find them, and set them up, and stick to
them. Smith's morality is Smith's creation : all his own

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1. R. B. Braithwaite, 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature
of Religious Belief' (1955), reprinted in J. Hick, (ed.)
*Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religi-
on* (1964), 429 f.

work (as the pavement artists say), and all his own responsibility. This view was adopted — with rather dour and desperate resolution — by the Existentialists.

Braithwaite's suggestion comes in at this point. According to him, a religious statement such as 'God is Love' is in fact a profession of a certain moral principle (or set of moral principles); it is an undertaking to try to live 'an agapeistic (loving) way of life'.

It is of course possible to announce adherence to some moral principle, without mentioning God or bringing religion into it. Atheists are not to be denied their morality by the mere *fiat* of a theory. On the other hand, it may be that those who make a religion out of their morality do *feel* differently about their moral principles. And that feeling may make a difference to their practice of their own morality. Religion is not, on this view, just 'morality tinged with emotion', i.e., vaguely suffused with some generalised benevolence; rather it is a morality built up and embraced with the ardour of the whole personality.

A religion is very often associated with some set of holy stories and sayings, which are often said to explain the origins of that religious community. For Braithwaite, such stories have a more practical significance. They help the devotee to practise his chosen way of life, by harnessing his sentiments and affections to that task, and by making him shun and dislike actions incompatible with his profession — a sort of aversion therapy. Braithwaite notes that, for this purpose, it does not matter whether the stories told are actually true; if they are told, and revered, then they will work.

Braithwaite's view has two definite advantages. First, the historical verification of religious stories loses its desperate importance: the Death-and-Resurrection of

Jesus can be treated as parable. Second, it has been asked how ethical duties could follow from religious (i.e. metaphysical) assertions without breach of the Autonomy of Morals. "God forgives you, so you should forgive others" may get the reply "Ok. He forgives me, so what?" Now on the new account this puzzling question simply disappears. The religious assertions, when properly interpreted, *are* commitments to moral principles. No further inference, sound or shaky, is required.

To Braithwaite's theory almost everyone objects: 'But that's not Christianity'. No, it is not Christianity *as so far understood*. Saints and fathers, theologians and philosophers have not in the past regarded their confessions of religious faith simply as commitments to a set of moral principles. If they had, then Braithwaite's view would lose its novelty, and we should not thank him for propounding it. It can hardly be an objection to a theory, that no one has thought of it before.

Some will say this is trifling. Christianity, they hold, is defined in terms of the beliefs held by Christians; not all of these are held in common by all Christians, but there is a central core shared by all Christians properly so called. These are stated in the creeds. They are beliefs about objective matters of fact. If Braithwaite translates them into empty, information-free vows of subjective commitment, then he is not confessing the same faith, but using the same phrases to construct a different one.

This objection begs the question at issue, for it simply re-states the 'propositional' view of religious belief, which construes confessions of faith as statements of descriptive factual belief. The difficulties to which this theory leads are now well-known ; and it is these that Braithwaite's alternative theory is intended to avoid.

It can hardly be an objection to an alternative theory, that it is *different* from the original.

Braithwaite's treatment of religious stories is essential to this theory. If he granted them historical truth as well as religious significance, then the statements of faith would regain a descriptive element. If he omitted then altogether, leaving each devotee entirely free to create his own ideal, then such an individualist religion might fairly be called Existentialism rather than Christianity. So he keeps them, but says they can have their religious effect without being literally or historically true. Now most of us will agree to this, with regard to other religions, but not about our own. We feel the need for an historical guarantee to underwrite the confessions that we make.

I should like to offer some observations on this point. Some stories which are held sacred in our tradition are plainly fictional : for example, the novel called *Job* and the tales of Adam and Eve. For some reason it is thought more polite to call such made-up stories 'myths'. Secondly, there are many stories whose connection, if any, with history is presently unknown and is unlikely ever to be discovered; for example, the storming of Jericho, the ascent of Elija, the birth-narratives of Jesus, and all his parables. As these stories are all retained in Holy Writ, it may be supposed that people find religious value in them, irrespective of their value or otherwise as history.

It is, of course, the Gospel stories that Christians are most unwilling to treat as non-historical. They want to know that Jesus lived and taught and died...otherwise Christianity will lack a founder, and be left hanging in the air. Here I agree with them, against Braithwaite, at least to this extent with recorded stories of some previous

personage inspire one to profess allegiance to his uncomfortable principles, then one would like to know how far he himself went in living by those principles. One would like to know whether they are *practical.* For this purpose, historical information is clearly required. Fortunately for us, the Gospels do provide such information, a little hazy in detail perhaps, but quite clear in its main outline. Jesus lived in Palestine, he taught so-and-so, he quarrelled with the Pharisees, who got him executed. Some of his followers said they saw him afterwards. Now this information is historical, it is reasonably certain, and it is relevant for someone thinking of professing some of Jesus' principles.

Whether any particular story is historical, i.e. factual, not fictional in character, is itself a factual question, and is not to be settled by reference to the use that some (religious) people wish to make of it. The question is not, what we want, but, what we can get, by way of history. So we cannot let Braithwaite say that all religious stories are non-factual. He may say that their factual content, if any, is always irrelevant to their religious use. If so, I disagree with the 'always', for the reasons indicated just above.

III

I have tried elsewhere [1] to characterise those commitments or undertakings which are specifically religious in character. We all make all sorts of undertakings, every day, to pay the milkman for his milk, not to exchange bus-tickets with another traveller, to be back home in good time in the evening. These undertakings all have conditions attached, express or implied : there is always some let-out. But we sometimes take on commitments

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1. H. Palmer, 'Affirmation and Assertion', *Philosophy* (1964), 1.

without conditions or let-outs : for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, etc.[1] Such 'ultimate' commitments inevitably shape or colour our whole lives; they are moral and ideal in character; and they are often deliberately made 'before God' in religious terminology.

Some will say that this theory also makes God our own creation, indeed reduces Him to an optional aspect of our language for exchanging vows. This complaint betrays a strong preconceived notion of where He *ought* to be found. But surely that is not for us to say. I would see the theory simply as stating that it is in the context of undertaking ultimate commitments that we come to speak of him, and (perhaps) to learn of Him. Whether that is so, is a question of fact and experience, and not to be settled by means of arguments. If it is so, — well, no doubt, — *we* would have arranged things otherwise, had we been in charge.

For me, it makes sense, of a sort, of Christianity to regard it as a particular fellowship of vows. Whether the same notions could usefully be applied in other religious communities, is something I should very much like to know.

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1. from Anglican marriage vow.

2

ARE INCARNATIONS UNIQUE?

I

It has been claimed, for many years, that Jesus of Nazareth is the only begotten son of God. From this it was held to follow that none could be saved outside the fellowship of his followers, the Church; and, that any other supposed incarnations of God must be false, bogus or unreal. Those conclusions are now unpopular, not only with those non-Christians to whose beliefs they appear to apply, but also with many Christians, who feel unhappy in so applying them. Of course, it takes some courage to say to a man: Your faith is false; your hope is vain. But the disquiet felt about these old slogans is not just a failure of courage. It is due to the conviction that, if God is love, then those slogans cannot be literally true.

Some Christians have fallen back, at this point, on saying that Jesus is *unique* — a term that well deserves analysis. If it means 'different in some way from everybody else', the statement is probably correct; e.g., Jesus, unlike the Buddha, lived in Palestine; unlike King Alfred, he was literate; unlike Spinoza, he trained as a carpenter; and so on. While in theory we cannot absolutely rule out that possibility of some *doppelganger*, historic but unknown, who resembled Jesus in every con-

ceivable respect, in practice we can safely neglect that possibility. As a man, then, Jesus was unique. And so am I. And so are you. Everyone is different.

The sense in which the uniqueness of Jesus might be established, from gospels or from common sense, is a sense that is irrelevant to religious position. One would hardly worship someone just for being different.

The slogan may however mean that Jesus is different from, *and better than*, everyone who ever lived, that he is incomparable. It is a puzzle to see how this should be established, without interviewing everyone; but if it *were* established to some one's satisfaction, then it is easy to suppose that he might worship this superman as Lord. But now, our original problem will recur: how to acknowledge duly the Lords whom others worship, if one regards Jesus in advance as the *nonpareil*.

II

Modern and educated Hinduism is slowly acquiring a creed, of which perhaps the first article is this: you must be tolerant. Tolerance means respecting another's religious views, and not contradicting him. So if you regard A as God's incarnation, and your neighbour so regards B, so that he likes to say about B (but not A) things which you want to say about A (but not B); then in the name of tolerance you both soft-pedal the brackets, and refer respectfully to the other's lord as Lord.

I find this doctrine attractive in some ways. It is, I think, true to a much-neglected aspect of the religous situation : that recognition of religious worth is only positive. I may see Jesus as divine; but I am in no position to say that some one else is not divine. I do not see that other as not-divine, though of course it may be that at present I do not recognize him as divine.

2

Tolerance may also lead to a lot of people not saying what they think. Religious tact of this sort is rarely a necessity, and never a virtue. Normally, respecting another's religious views will *include* contradicting them where they differ from one's own. Until this happens, the parties have not even met.

The doctrine of tolerance must of course be seen in the context of other articles of Hindu belief ; that there is only one supreme being, whom men worship differently; that religion is a way to personal perfection, so that each must follow that which suits him best ; and in following, he is going up the same mountain by another path. In this context, non-contradiction makes good sense, outside it, less. So perhaps 'tolerance' is not really for export, except in a package with other items of the creed.

III

The notion of uniqueness has also this aspect : that one can (or should) worship only one incarnation. Many have felt this, without being able to explain their certainty. Others would be happy to close the matter with a definition : adoring different deities does not count as worship, like the worship of one. And this in turn might be supported by a comparison. Some peoples practise monogamy. Now *if we* give the name 'marriage' to this relation to one's wife (or husband), surely this name is only by courtesy extended to a relation to several wives (or husbands), a relation which must surely be so different. Similarly, adoring several gods is only called 'worship' by courtesy, for the relation involved must be quite different from that between a worshipper and his *unique* object of adoration.

I find these arguments unconvincing. There are polytheists. They perform religious obeisance and offer

prayers. We call these activities 'worship' because that is the nearest handy term for such activities. What else are we to call them? It may be that mono-worship is *better* in some way ; but that is a substantive issue, and not to be settled by playing with the terms.

It may be added that true polytheists are in rather short supply, for many who are so called say that there is some High God or Universal Spirit 'behind' the beings they worship. In particular, we may take leave to doubt Max Mueller's claim that the Vedic priests worshipped one-god-at-a-time (*henotheism*). No one can disprove this; but it seems simpler to suppose that the hymns to different deities were (in so far as it is appropriate to speak of authorship) the work of different hands.

So far we have considered the problem of different supposed incarnations, whom different people worship differently and exclusively. The question remains, how anyone is to recognise any incarnation. Being an incarnation of God, he (or she) should display divine characteristics, or at least those that are suitable for earthly display. Do we have a list of these? Is our position like that of the police constable, who is given the characteristics of the wanted man—stooping gait, mole on right chin, left shoulder dropped.........? If not, then even a set of characteristics that was in fact unique could not tell us that their bearer was divine.

This problem arises because religious language is taken as descriptive in intent : e g. a creed shows you what that believer thinks his God *is like*. On an alternative account, religious language is always and only the language of devotion, i.e., the purpose of saying 'God is love' or 'Praise the Lord' or 'our Father' is always in some way to express allegiance.

On this account there is no problem about recognising incarnations. For one does not recognise some person as fulfilling some ready-made requirements, like the constable recognising, picking out the wanted man by noticing that he has what is on the list. Rather, one rocognises in some person qualities which demand our devotion. One does not need to have a list of these in advance ; sometimes we recognise the demand only when we meet the quality.

Seen in this light, talk of Jesus as unique will be taken as fun-talk, like 'the only girl in the world.' Fans do not trouble with dull facts too much, but they use words to convey and share their commitment. It is a pity to spoil such poems with theology

3

NOT MUCH OF REVOLUTION IN PHILOSOPHY

It is unsatisfactory to chat about philosophers, even in bulk, instead of studying their philosophy ; for they are on the whole a very odd, mixed up, dull sort of people, and have nothing in common except their interest in or even devotion to philosophy.   Elsewhere it is said 'The play's the thing': I would say, 'the argument's the thing', and forget all those philosophers.

The second reason why this talk will be unsatisfactory will be all too obvious. I am not competent to give such a talk.   I do not have a wide acquaintance among the clever and the great.   I do not go to conferences much, and when I do go, I come away early and dissatisfied. You need John Passmore or J. L. Mackie, F. C. Copleston or even H. D. Lewis to do justice to a theme like this.   My own tutor, J. O. Urmson, has written on one part of it in his beautifully little book on *Philosophical Analysis* : but I am not sure if he would think much of the rest of the field. Perhaps his virtues can cover my insufficiencies.

After that liberating ritual of self-depreciation, I turn to my subject, and take an arbitrary starting point in the early 1920s with the publication in English of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The *Tractatus* was mainly concerned with the relation between an ideal logical symbolism and the world it would perfectly

represent. The author seems sometimes to argue from the form of the symbols to the reality they symbolized— yet another essay in rational metaphysics. But the book also contained the startling declaration that tautologies are empty, that they do not say anything—a dogma which would destroy all attempts to work out the general structure of the universe by means of reasoning. Wittgenstein thus paved the way for the Logical Positivism of the Vienna Circle in the thirties by which time Wittgenstein himself was moving away from it.

That positivism was presented in English in 1936 by A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* — a simple-minded, hard-hitting, perverse, little book which is still prescribed to almost all first year undergraduates because (1) it is short, and (2) it is possible to make out what the author is trying to say. Teachers also suppose that if the student swallows this poison straight away he may then be ready for their antidotes.

The position in Britain just before the war was a mixed one, as is natural when one school of thought gives way gradually and unwillingly to another. Idealists of the tradition of Bradley, men like Ewing held many senior posts. Most of their juniors were positivists or followers of Wittgenstein ; though it is not now possible to get anyone to admit to having been a logical positivist before the war : just as it is difficult to find self-confessed pragmatists. The theory was attractive, but too easy to undermine.

Among Wittgenstein's disciples at Oxford there was a close study of several typescript sets of lecture–notes, circulated privately and known as the Blue and Brown Books (now published under that title). Those with this privileged access to the Master's second thoughts promptly passed them on to their own pupils ; and these, in a

year or two, secured teaching posts, and so passed the message on.

In studying the change of philosophical fashion, or temper, attention should be given to the dominating position of the Oxford school. Almost every college in Oxford has a philosophy don and some have two. So there are always upwards of thirty teachers of philosophy, often nearer fifty. There is now a large graduate school, of Americans and others, taking a stiff course modestly called the B. Phil. Students who do well in a first degree in philosophy at a provincial university are often, and rightly, recommended to take a second degree at Oxford. The result is that in England a very large proportion of the philosophy teaching staff at every university has studied at Oxford, either for a first degree or for a B.Phil. Any revolution in philosophy which starts at Oxford is therefore well placed for a rapid takeover of the rest of the country— rapid in academic terms, that is, within 30 or 40 years.

In Oxford the students belong to colleges, teaching-cum-residential units of about 300 members each. Within his college, each student will get to know several teachers well and both they and the college may try to keep in touch with him when he goes down. The size of the country makes it possible for teachers even in out-lying universities like Exeter or Hull to return to Oxford for a seminar or private discussion and to find out what is going on. This system of 'keeping in touch' has, I believe, helped to strengthen Oxford's hold on the teaching of philosophy at other universities.

Lastly there is the matter of recommendation. Every applicant for a teaching post must find three more senior teachers to speak for him: his own tutor or tutors, no doubt, and perhaps a professor whose seminar

he had attended.   Now the weight of a recommendation depends on the reader knowing the writer and being disposed to accept the writer's assessment of the candidate. So if someone in Kent recommends his student to someone in Liverpool, whom he does not know, it may not help the student much.   But a chit from Oxford is sure to carry weight.   So every student asks for it.   In this way the Oxford faculty come to control, or at least to influence, philosophy appointments at all the other universities.

I have gone into these rather earthly matters at some length, because they may help to explain the so-called Revolution in Philosophy.[1]   According to several writers, such a Revolution occurred in Britain, around 1940-50 ; that is, there was a complete change in the style and direction of philosophical enquiry.   This grandiose claim strikes me as inappropriate.

I would agree that many teachers, previously logical positivists, were persuaded by Wittgenstein's second thoughts, and so were still opposed to their predecessors, the Idealists. It also happened that a rapid expansion took place in universities, and that the resulting new posts were almost all filled with Oxford graduates; and that the philosophical scene in consequence came to look much more uniform.   But basically the changeover was of a sort usual in any change of schools.   The victorious school soon acquired the name of Linguistic Philosophy, which it strenuously repudiated. Some members went further, and denied that they formed a school or even that they had any particular system of beliefs.   Thinking things through and through, they suggested, was no longer practised.   One should concentrate on a single issue and analyse it fearlessly, uninfluenced and undeter-

1. A. J. Ayer, W. C. Kneale and others, *The Revolution in Philosophy* (1956).

red by the hash this might make of the rest of one's philosophy.

The analysis itself took the form of careful definition or redefinition of the terms involved, sometimes embellished by alleged snippets of ordinary usage, by the bus-conductor or the fishmonger. There were two thoughts behind this practice, and both went back to Wittgenstein. One was that all philosophical problems were muddles, mainly due to misunderstanding the import of certain grammatical forms, as in

'I met nobody, while coming here.'
'Well, why didn't you bring him along?'

The second notion was that ordinary language had worked so well for so long that there could not be much wrong with it. If puzzled, we should go back to ordinary language for a solution, and then forget about it all. Once the fly is out of the bottle the buzzing ought to stop. Neither of these ideas was entirely new. Philosophers like Cook Wilson and Moore had engaged in interminable definition and analysis, long before Wittgenstein burst upon the English scene, and they hoped to clear up some muddles thereby. The new school was really over-correcting the first thoughts of its founder. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein tried to sketch out a perfect language in which one could not get muddled or even make a mistake. He later decided that this would not work, and that a natural language must be already quite allright. It is this insight that his followers sought to illustrate.

A lively critique of the movement was offered in the early sixties by E. Gellner's *Words and Things*. As his title suggests, his main message was that philosophers had disregarded reality in their concentration on the definition and analysis of words. He could hardly have found

an older criticism to make of a philosopher. But the reality he thought they are neglecting was a social one ; the facts about how our social groupings and behaviour affect our own interests and preference and even what we see as truth. This led Gellner into an amusing sketch of how the Oxford tutorial system, considered sociologically, must be conditioning the philosophy that it purveys : how students have first to be infected with false views, so that they may welcome the peculiar medicine which their teachers bring. Ryle thought the book made unjustified personal attacks on his friends and colleagues and refused to have it reviewed in *Mind*, thus starting that controversy with Bertrand Russell which is engagingly portrayed in early pages of Ved Mehta's *The Fly and the Fly Bottle*. Others, myself included, have failed to get their books reviewed in *Mind*, and we envy Gellner for his more profitable failure—he got such a review specifically refused.

Around 1970 there were signs of a new revolt, signalized as so often in a new journal. *Radical Philosophy* was going to break away from the stifling uniformity of British philosophy, the deadly, nonsense of everlasting analysis of nothing in particular. Let the windows be flung wide to every wind that blows; let us revive Hegel and admit Heidegger. This enthusiasm for 100 flowers soon petered out for lack of bloom ; there just were not enough followers of Hegel to keep a journal going and the followers of Sartre preferred talking to each other. The journal therefore reverted to single flower, or weed: Marxism, and has continued since as a red Devil in rather tiny print But it has indicated the arrival in the world of philosophy teaching of a substantial number of political radicals (long after the sociology departments were overrun with them) : and these have succeeded in bringing political theory back to the centre of the syllabus : it had almost been killed off by the positivists, who saw

too clearly that nothing could be proved. In Swansea, a strong school of Wittgensteinians continued to publish his lesser papers and ponder his smaller thoughts. They were, perhaps, mainly interested in using his occasional remarks on religion to support their own theory, sometimes called fideism : that each religious language and mode of religious life (i.e. each religion) was allright on its own, and could not profitably be criticised from outside : each God-language is autonomous. These teachers gave their students a much heavier dose of Wittgenstein than usual, in an undergraduate course, lasting 4 years instead of 3, but several of the graduates have survived quite sane, and two years back managed to organize a 'Swansea Graduates againt Oppression Society' to protest against some act of the professor's of which they disapproved.

In quieter havens like Oxford and Bristol some tentative steps have been made back to metaphysics. Strawson said his was descriptive : it was certainly argumentative. Ross Harrison also tries to describe the most general features of any intelligible world. It is a tribute to the strength of the Positivist attack on metaphysics that no one should attempt it for 20 or 30 years after positivism.

It remains, perhaps, to express my own prejudices about these several schools, if they were not already obvious from this little history. The Verification Principle I regard as a 1-point programme that failed. There was no good reason to adopt it, and it did not produce the goods. 'Look for the use' is a valuable initial slogan, not the be-all and end-all of analysis. Philosophical therapy is remarkably ineffective, since patients will come back for more : the best sort of treatment perhaps, from the *doctor's* point of view. So much I am against. I won't mention Marxism, which is not a serious philosophical theory.

I myself would be in favour of Metaphysics, if only some of it could be made to work. And I do think the philosophy-of-X is of interest, and even benefit to some of the practitioners of X. In my teaching, I try to help people read big books, with particular reference to the arguments, and I even regard this training as mildly beneficial in some walks of life. To me, the main aim of degree studies should be to enable the student to go on *without his teachers*. On this view, an M.A. class must be a contradiction in terms.